Tradition and Innovation in Yakṣagāna:
Kota Shivarama Karanth and Keremane Shambhu Hegde

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I would like to begin this article on tradition and innovation in Yakṣagāna with a remark by R.K. Laxman, the famous cartoonist. When he visited Australia in 1960, the city of Perth was proudly celebrating its 150th anniversary. Quite nonchalantly, Laxman states: "The city is quite young really . . . Suddenly a silver tumbler at home given to me casually by my mother for drinking coffee came to my mind. It was just as many years old!" This only goes to show how in a country with a long history and so long a memory, even a cup can last a hundred or two hundred years. Another important point to be noted is that the old silver cup was not in the cupboard of a museum, to be displayed as an antique, but was an integral part of a person's everyday life.

The question of tradition, its various meanings, its relevance for the present, its ideological position in a fast-changing world like ours, have all been variously discussed by scholars of our times. Tradition no doubt refers to something that has been handed down to us from the past. At the same time, like history, tradition is also a construct — we restructure, recreate the past as a kind of bricolage, in ways that we consider relevant, from the vantage point of the present. In the case of living traditions, tradition is handed down from generation to generation, but in the process it also changes subtly, some elements being added and others deleted. But when we refer to tradition as a corpus, we refer to the way we understand the past *now*, from the position of the present.

One look at some of our most 'traditional' forms will make the meaning clear. Bharatanatyam was a dance form practised mostly by the *devadasis* and was known by names such as Sadir, Nauch, etc., until the 1930s, when efforts were made to 'revive' and 'purify' the form by 'enlightened' persons like Rukmini Devi Arundale and institutions like the Music Academy of Madras. The 'classical' form of Bharatanatyam that we witness today is largely a construct of the 1930s. The case of Kathakali, which emerged from the earlier *attam* by the efforts of Vallathol Narayana Menon and Kalamandalam around the same time, is quite similar. These forms were reinvented in the changed socio-political and cultural situation. In the process of this reinvention, they became 'classicized', and their performative contexts changed. They also became 'respectable' because of the interest of the educated elite and the middle class, which had looked down upon these forms earlier. These reinvented forms were surely based on the earlier forms, but at the same time, they did undergo a change. Thus the concept of tradition as it emerges is of a careful rearrangement where elements from the past that are considered relevant are reconstructed in the present — the bricolage that I referred to earlier. Such an effort may either be a conscious exercise or an unconscious one.

In the performing arts, tradition takes on different connotations. To begin with, the grammar of a performance is conditioned by the *shastra* — the rules that have been developed and codified (in some cases) over centuries. These rules guide and shape the performance even in the present. Any radical change in the grammar of a particular form would mean a new form

altogether. Of course, changes do take place in subtle ways as they always have even in the past. But any basic change in the grammar would mean creating a new language.

Similarly, the discourse and world-view that the form expresses is also a part of tradition. This world-view takes shape as a result of the aspiration and genius of the entire community (patrons, artists, audience) that has nurtured the particular form over centuries. But when society undergoes a radical change, the changed/changing situation brings about a change in the world-view, the value system, etc, of the society, necessitating a change in the discourse of the form as well.

Herein lies the true challenge for any artist working in any of the traditional performing arts today. He/she is tradition-bound to guard the grammar and beauty of the form, but can he/she blindly represent a discourse and world-view that is not in consonance with the present? No doubt there are values and experiences that are relevant for all ages. That precisely is the reason why these traditional forms become valuable to us. At the same time, a form will continue to be relevant only if it can represent the contemporary ethos as well.

If the form — its grammar — is flexible, it may be capable of embodying a new discourse. Otherwise, the form will become what folklorists call 'frozen' — a museum piece, a relic of the past, which some highly dedicated artists and scholars may at best try to preserve. More often that not, such efforts end up as futile exercises.

The death or extinction of some forms and the emergence of new forms of expression are all a part of the cultural life of communities. This process becomes all the more accentuated when a society is in the process of great change, as is the case with Indian society today. Various forms in India have tackled the question of tradition and modernity in varying ways depending upon the different circumstances under which these forms survive. We also have the predilections or individuality of each artist, who may approach this question in radically different ways. In Bharatanatyam, for example, we have Padma Subrahmanyam as well as Chandralekha, to whom the tradition of Bharatanatyam would mean two different things altogether.

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Yakṣagāna is a dance theatre of Karnataka with a history of at least five hundred years. Yakṣagāna also underwent a process of change like Bharatanatyam or Kathakali in the first half of this century, but only in a limited sense. In popular parlance, the form was known as Ata (play), or Bayalata (open-air play).

The performative context of Yakṣagāna underwent a radical change with the emergence of commercial troupes during the 1950s and '60s. Till then, Yakṣagāna had always been performed in the open air. With commercialization, Yakṣagāna began to change radically. Attracting more spectators and making money became important considerations.

One thing that differentiates Yakṣagāna from other traditional theatrical forms of India is its phenomenal popularity. At present, there are more than twenty troupes which offer about two hundred all-night performances each in a year in just two or three districts of Karnataka. These are commercially organized troupes that survive only on the support of the paying public. Apart from these, we also have troupes that perform in the open air and innumerable

amateur troupes that perform infrequently. Yakṣagàna has not undergone the process of classicization; till recently, there were no schools where Yakṣagana was taught formally.

Yakṣagàna has therefore never become frozen. In the past few decades, it has been in a state of flux, undergoing a process of change. These changes have affected almost all aspects of the art: its performative context, its themes, the different media involved in the performance — music, dance, etc. — and the discourse itself. The question of change has become more accentuated in Yakṣagàna than in many other forms of dance-theatre in India. In order to understand these changes in proper perspective, we have to study them in relation to the performative context. The performative context in turn is conditioned by the socio-political, economic and even philosophical changes that are taking place in society at present. This would need a separate study much beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the Yakṣagàna of today stands as a fine example of what folklorists call 'invented tradition'. The term refers to the process by which cultural forms are recoded and restructured, becoming expressive vehicles for new meanings and ideologies. Traditions remain relatively stable when the society where they belong remains stable. But when a transformation of society weakens or destroys the social structures in which a tradition had taken shape, the tradition is destabilized. Then, the same cultural form may be used for discourses for which it was not originally meant. Yakṣagàna, as noted earlier, remains extremely popular even now and has thus become a fine example of invented tradition. This does not mean that Yakṣagana has suddenly ceased to project the meanings that it has over the centuries. The contending meanings and ideologies are in a dialectical process. Being a traditional form and an invented tradition, Yakṣagana reflects both sets of meanings. It also shows how contending groups within a society contest to control a cultural form and the meanings that this generates.

In such a period of change, it is quite possible that the positive aspects of tradition would also be lost and the form redefined to such an extent that it becomes almost unrecognizable. In Yakṣagàna itself this can be seen in the emergence of a form like Tulu Yakṣagàna, which has almost totally broken away from the traditional form. In such cases, there would inevitably be a movement in the opposite direction as well — an attempt to retain the 'best' in the tradition and weed out unwanted and anachronistic elements. If Rukmini Devi Arundale did this for Bharatanatyam, Vallathol did it for Kathakali. In Yakṣagana too, such efforts have been made by a few persons. This paper is a study of two such efforts — in contrast to each other — by Kota Shivarama Karanth and Keremane Shambhu Hegde. It is interesting to note that though both of them tried to preserve the traditional beauty and strength of Yakṣagàna, their artistic creations took different directions.

KOTA SHIVARAMA KARANTH

Shivarama Karanth is regarded as one of the most important novelists in Kannada. He was a towering personality, who involved himself in a whole range of activities from popular science to painting. But it would not be wrong to say that Yakṣagàna was his first love from his early childhood till the end of his life. His contribution to Yakṣagana has been phenomenal, and can be broadly divided into two parts for our consideration: (a) his contribution to Yakṣagana in general (his research, writings, workshops, etc.); and (b) his creative work. His

first book on Yakṣagāna was published in 1958. His writings on Yakṣagāna texts and authors remain the most authoritative to this day, as they combine extensive fieldwork with scholarly interpretation. He also conducted a number of workshops on different aspects of Yakṣagāna like its music, dance, costume, make-up, etc., involving a number of performers, young and old. In these workshops, he attempted to recreate many traditional aspects of performance that had almost gone into oblivion. If Yakṣagāna has retained its traditional costume, particularly in the northern school, a large part of the credit should go to Karanth. He also designed a special costume and headgear for female characters, in accordance with the general principles of costume in Yakṣagāna. This design has found such complete acceptance that it is often assumed to be part of a centuries-old tradition. Credit also goes to Karanth for drawing national and even international attention to Yakṣagāna as one of the important dance-theatre traditions of India.

Karanth's creative work in Yakṣagāna found expression through Yaksharanga. This was the experimental troupe established by Karanth in 1975 after several decades of experimentation in various aspects of Yakṣagāna — its music, costume, etc. In this endeavour, he seems to have been inspired by the Western ballet, and Indian dance traditions like Bharatanatyam, where communication takes place mainly through music and dance. Perhaps he also wanted to overcome the limitations imposed by language (in the form of improvised dialogue) in reaching out to non-Kannada audiences. Karanth was convinced that the strength and beauty of Yakṣagāna lay in its dance, music and costume, and he wanted to highlight these in the performances of Yaksharanga.

So he decided to get rid of the improvised dialogue altogether. In Yakṣagāna the dialogues are not written down and do not form part of the received text, which contains only songs. As the *bhagavata* (singer) sings the song, the actor dances and emotively enacts the 'content' of the song. After the song-dance sequence, the actor creates his own dialogue on the stage. This is based on the song just sung, but barely so. The actor in his dialogue fills out the details, expands on the emotional content, justifies the character he is representing, etc. Though this dialogue is based on the oral tradition, it leaves room for the artist's skill and judgement.

When Karanth decided to get rid of improvised dialogue, other changes necessarily followed. Music and dance now had to take over the function of improvised speech. Therefore great attention was paid to articulation in singing. Instead of one, two singers were used. Accompanying instruments like the violin and saxophone were employed together with the traditional instruments. Some modifications were made in the dance as well. The emphasis was now on the expression of particular emotional states through steps and body movements. More attention was thus paid to choreography and group movements. Slight changes were made in costumes too. Instead of the heavy headgears and accoutrements, lighter ones made of aluminium and cardboard were used. Attention was paid to the costumes of even minor characters. The overall design, and harmony of colour and costume, became important factors in deciding on matters of detail.

We can consider one or two examples of Karanth's skill and artistry in dance composition. In *Pancavati*, when Jaṭayu dies, the song indicates that he attains mokṣa. In depicting this scene, Jaṭayu in mortal pain moves all over the stage to the fast rhythm of the percussion;

Kota Shivarama Karanth in a lecture-demonstration at the Yakshagana Seminar, Udupi, in 1969 (above); and in a rehearsal with the National Dance Ensemble in Delhi, 1973 (below).

and in deep stage, he reclines his head on Rama's shoulder with Lakṣmaṇa at his feet. The final composition itself suggests the salvation attained by Jaṭāyu. Similarly, in *Nala-Damayanti*, during the dice game the characters themselves move like dice. Visualizations such as these are not part of Yakṣagāna and are Karanth's creation.

Karanth's experiments have succeeded in making Yakṣagāna known in non-traditional areas. If Yakṣagāna is today recognized as an important traditional dance theatre of India, a large part of the credit goes to him. His experiments have had an impact on professional troupes as well. The present attention to costume, dance, and choreography may be attributed to Karanth.

In Yaksharanga, Shivarama Karanth was the director, and the entire performance was the product of his artistic imagination. All the artists functioned under his supervision and according to his guidance. He not only directed the individual dance movements and histrionic expressions of individual artists, he also composed the group movements, chose the costumes, and selected the musical score. This kind of system — where the director controls the entire performance — is common in urban, non-traditional theatre, but was unheard of in Yakṣagāna. Though Yakṣagāna is a group activity, where many performers function together, there had never been the practice of one person exercising total artistic control. Karanth's efforts thus were different from those of Vallathol, for example, because he involved himself directly in the artistic creation, giving it a shape according to his imagination. In this experimental mould, he produced many traditional *prasangas* (episodes) which included *Nala-Damayanti*, *Pancavaṭi*, *Bhiṣma Vijaya*, etc.

Yaksharanga was vehemently attacked by traditional Yakṣagāna artists and viewers for the many changes that Karanth had introduced. Removing improvised dialogues, particularly, was seen as destroying the very essence of Yakṣagāna. In trying to take Yakṣagāna to non-Kannada regions, and in trying to raise its stature to that of other 'classical' forms like Bharatanatyam, Karanth did not perhaps realize that he was in danger of turning Yakṣagāna into a packaged, marketable commodity — by making it acceptable in the national and even international cultural market. However, in this context, we should remember that his effort was in response to the nationalist dream of projecting Indian culture in opposition to the colonial discourse. This dream was shared by many intellectuals of the period, who tried to project regional forms on a national and international platform. Another comment that was often made about Yaksharanga was that inside Karnataka it was projected as an experimental venture, but outside Karnataka its performances were presented, and often perceived, as the standard, traditional form of Yakṣagāna.

On the whole, the influence of Karanth's experimental troupe on the practice of Yakṣagāna has been limited. Several reasons may be cited for this. One was the absence of improvised dialogue. By removing this element completely, one of the unique features of Yakṣagāna was lost. The improvised text not merely provides artists with an opportunity to express their individuality, but this freedom is one of the important means through which Yakṣagāna has been able to retain its relevance by a continuous process of reinterpretation. The dialogue also plays an important role in the entire communicative process. Without this powerful medium of expression, the audience found Karanth's experiment difficult to accept.

Another reason was Karanth's concept of director itself. Yakṣagāna is a group activity,

and no single person exercises total artistic control on the performance. Each actor fashions his role according to his vision and talent, and would strongly object to the incursion of anyone else into his domain. In spite of such an approach, the performance — a group activity — becomes possible because of strong and stable conventions.

This kind of creative process, where the artistic product is the result of a combination of many individual efforts, rather than the product of one individual intellect, is typical of folk performances. In such performances, we must be mentally prepared for the unexpected. It may be a most wonderful performance or it may be a fiasco!

It is odd that Karanth did not try to present new interpretations of old themes in any of his productions. Though he paid close attention to each and every detail, there was no perceivable attempt at conveying new messages through these productions.

But Yaksharanga did succeed in crossing the linguistic barrier. It did succeed in making Yakṣagāna known in non-Kannada regions. Its influence on Yakṣagāna can be seen, as mentioned earlier, in the greater attention that artists, even in commercial troupes, now pay to costume, articulation in singing, and dance. Perhaps more than anything else, Karanth opened up further possibilities of experimentation in Yakṣagāna. The many experiments in Yakṣagāna that we witness now by artists like Udyavara Madhva Acharya, Raghava Nambiar, the Saketa troupe, and many others, may all be traced to the pioneering efforts of Shivarama Karanth. The infinite versatility of Yakṣagāna as a form was for the first time demonstrated by Karanth.

Shivarama Karanth's overall contribution to Yakṣagāna is of course not confined to the productions of Yaksharanga. His books and writings on Yakṣagāna even to this day remain the most authoritative. Through his many workshops, he brought to light many ancient ragas that had almost been forgotten. His work on Yakṣagāna costume and make-up made actors aware of the beauty and meaning of this aspect of their art. At the point he entered the scene, the traditional costumes were undergoing a drastic change owing to the influence of professional theatre; they would perhaps not have survived the last fifty years but for the efforts of Karanth. It was also largely due to his efforts that Yakṣagāna came to be recognized as an important performance tradition of India. Even though his troupe Yaksharanga was not completely accepted by the traditional Yakṣagāna audience, it undoubtedly opened out new vistas for further experimentation.

KEREMANE SHAMBHU HEGDE

If Shivarama Karanth was a writer and litterateur who was attracted to Yakṣagāna, Shambhu Hegde was born and brought up in a family of Yakṣagāna artists. His father Shivarama Hegde was one of the greatest Yakṣagāna artists of his time. It was in this ambience that he grew up. His uncle and his brother were also renowned artists.

Shambu Hegde's experiments have been carried out within the commercial troupes he was associated with. He started his own troupe in 1973 after working in other troupes for a few years.

He is now among the most important Yakṣagāna artists and his influence on younger

artists has been remarkable. Both as an actor and the head of a troupe, he has thought about, and brought in, changes in various aspects of Yakṣagāna ranging from interpretation of characters from the Purāṇas to seats in an auditorium. Many of the features introduced by him are now common practice in most Yakṣagāna troupes.

When he was young, Shambhu Hegde underwent training in choreography under Maya Rao for three years. This exposure to other dance forms of India perhaps opened his eyes to the potentiality of dance in Yakṣagāna and to the possibilities of the form as a whole. When he started his career as a professional artist, he slowly began experimenting in the dance steps used in Yakṣagāna, in emotive acting — bhāvābhinaya — in interpretation of characters, etc. As he continued these efforts, he began to feel the need for greater coordination among his fellow artists and for greater artistic freedom at the organizational level. It is necessary here to remember that with commercialization, artistic control of troupes was slowly slipping away from the hands of artists to an entity called 'contractors'. These were people who sponsored a show and agreed to pay a fixed sum to a troupe for its performance. They took the risk of the box office and decided the prasanga (episode, play) to be performed. His own troupe too was commercially organized and subject to all the pulls and pressures of such a set-up. In fact, one of the adverse comments made about him is that he too yielded to commercial pressures. Be that as it may, one principle Shambu Hegde has followed is to keep the artistic control himself and never to yield to the pressure of contractors. In his own troupe, he had greater liberty, and his artistic vision began to take shape. He inherited the North Kannada style of Yakṣagāna, which puts an emphasis on leisurely exposition of bhāva and the use of mudras in dance. He had before him the examples of renowned artists of this school like his own father Keremane Shivarama Hedge and Mudkani Narayana Hedge. To this tradition, he added his own artistic ideas and creations; he was able to realize these without altering the framework of Yakṣagāna.

In his acting career Shambhu Hegde has played a variety of roles. He is equally adept at playing sātvika roles like Rama and Hariścandra on the one hand, and villainous ones like Kamsa and Jarasandha on the other. To every character that he portrays, he brings an originality of approach and interpretation. All the other innovations he has brought about in Yakṣagāna — in dance, in music, in improvised dialogue, even in the design of the stage — go to serve his fundamental purpose of creating a new signification. At a time when new stories not based on Purāṇic lore are becoming popular in Yakṣagāna, he adheres to the traditional texts and believes that the originality of the artist lies in looking for new significances relevant to the present time in the old stories. New interpretation of myths and of characters is at the centre of his artistic creation. This approach of his could be called sātvikābhinaya, one of the four aspects of acting mentioned by Bharata. He captures the satva or essence of the role he is playing in the context of the present and uses all the potentiality of Yakṣagāna as a form to express this satva. It is in this light that we have to see his many innovations and experimentations in different aspects of Yakṣagāna.

Dance

Though Yakṣagāna is a dance theatre, traditionally it has followed some kind of compartmentalization in the deployment of elements like dance, music, costume, improvised

dialogue, etc., which mostly have certain set functions. Dance, for example, for the most part, consisted of fast, rhythmic steps — *nṛtta* which Bharata describes as emotionless dance, and is well suited for expression of *vīra* and *raudra rasas*. Shambhu Hegde, however, began with the idea that dance should be capable of expressing all the bhavas. The North Kannada style which he inherited certainly lays emphasis on elaborate expression of bhavas through dance. But even in that tradition, only the first half of the song was used for emotive acting, employing mudras or hand gestures. The second half of the song was reserved for nṛtta — fast, rhythmic steps and movements. Shambhu Hegde changed this and began to use the entire song for emotive acting. The elaboration of the song in slow tempo suited this emotive representation of bhava and the meaning of the song through dance. With this change, he had to use new mudras not found in the Yakṣagāna repertoire; many a time he also had to devise new dance steps and movements to communicate the bhava, repeating the lines of a song several times. For some songs that are sung without rhythm, custom dictated that the actor sit or stand and enact these without any movement of the feet. Here, Shambhu Hegde added movements.

He also began using many of the traditional dance movements to convey new meanings in accordance with the characters he was representing. This can be seen in his dance composed for characters like Hanumanta, Bāhuka (Naḷa in disguise), etc. To give one specific example, *maṇḍi kuṇita* (pirouetting on knees) is one of the traditional Yakṣagāna dance movements used in scenes of battle, etc., for the expression of vīra bhava. But as Karna, Hegde used the same movement for depicting the relationship between man and God. Apart from using the traditional dance steps in a new sense, he has also created a repertoire of new steps and movements not found in Yakṣagāna. Perhaps his most original contribution in dance has been to evolve special dance steps and body movements for the depiction of *śoka* rasa, which he uses in playing roles like Karna, Rama in *Rama Niryana* (depicting the last moments of Rama's life), Daśaratha, etc.

Through his performances, Shambhu Hegde has shown the potentiality of Yakṣagāna dance as a medium of artistic expression. He has also become a powerful influence on most artists of the younger generation, some of whom have even gone to the extent of imitating him blindly. If dance has regained its place in Yakṣagāna today, the credit should go to artists who are masters of Yakṣagāna dance like Shambhu Hegde and Chittani Ramachandra Hegde.

Stage

In order to facilitate dance movements as well as to remove obstructions to the vision of spectators from all angles, Shambhu Hegde has devised a special semi-circular stage. (The traditional Yakṣagāna stage is rectangular, with poles on all four sides.) The stage that he uses is much bigger in size, open on three sides, and with no sight barriers. The semi-circular shape accords with the semi-circular movements that he uses in his dance. He has often been criticized for this innovation. Critics argue that the two poles in front of the stage 'frame' the artist, and that in the semicircular stage the artist merges into the surroundings. Shambhu Hegde insists that his stage is in accordance with the description of the stage in old Yakṣagāna texts. We should also remember that the 'traditional' stage is itself a recent innovation, only several decades old, which became popular with the emergence of commercial troupes.

Reinterpretation of Mythical Characters

As I have pointed out earlier in this article, Shambhu Hegde firmly believes that the task of the modern artist is to look for current relevance in the mythical stories presented in Yakṣagāna. Every role he has played, he has tried to interpret in a different way. His interpretations are almost always an attempt to understand these myths from a human perspective, in seeing the characters in human terms rather than as merely representing good or evil, as gods or demons. For example, Dustabudhi in *Chandrahasa* was usually depicted as a wicked character who goes against the will of God and is finally punished when all his plans to kill Chandrahasa fail. Shambhu Hegde depicts the same character as a person who has excessive faith in his own power to control the lives of everyone around him. The performance thus becomes a comment on the limits to human will and capability.
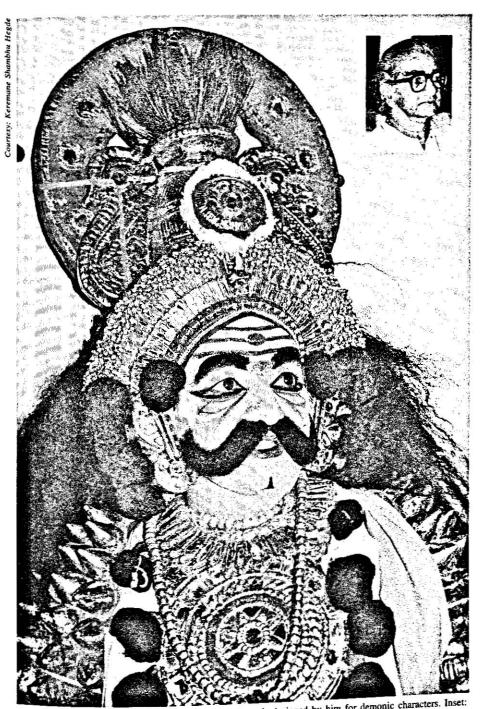
Similarly, Rama in *Rama Niryāna* (Rama's End) is presented as a man torn by conflict between his personal self and his duty as a king; Kṛṣṇa in *Kṛṣṇa Sandhana* (Kṛṣṇa's Mediation) is represented as an astute statesman who uses his skill and intelligence for the cause of good. Bhīṣma in *Bhīṣma Parva*, which deals with his generalship in the Kurukṣétra war, almost becomes a representative of 'absurd' philosophy — showing the futility of all human effort but also how effort is inescapable — in a manner reminiscent of Albert Camus' analysis of the Sisyphus myth.

Humanizing the Wicked

One of the trends witnessed in Yakṣagāna in the last several decades — particularly in the form of Yakṣagāna called Taḷamaddale, which makes use of only music and *vāchikabhinaya* — is the new perspective in which 'wicked' characters are represented. We can see a conscious effort to 'humanize' and present in a sympathetic light characters like Kaurava, Karna, Jarāsandha, Kamsa, etc. In the Purāṇas these are wicked characters who are punished by the force of good. Even before Shambhu Hegde, such efforts had been made with characters like Kaurava in *Gadāyuddha*, Jarāsandha in *Magadha Vadhe*, etc. Shambhu Hegde is among the most important practitioners who popularized this new way of looking at 'evil' characters.

One or two examples may make the point clear. Kamsa for example is presented by Hegde as a person who is haunted by the fear of death. Kichaka was traditionally represented as a drunken, lecherous lout who tried to seduce Sairandhri (Draupadi) and was killed by Bhīma. But Shambhu Hegde presents him as a lovelorn hero who was fascinated by Draupadi at her *swayamvara* and now falls in love with Sairandhri without realizing that she is the same woman.

Such interpretations work best when there is scope for uncovering new meanings in the original story. For example, characters like Duryodhana or Karna in the original epic have many heroic qualities. With a subtle shift of emphasis, they can be made protagonists instead of 'anti-heroes'. The way Shambhu Hegde presents them, they almost become tragic heroes deserving the sympathy of the spectators. In his hands, Karna becomes an example of the injustice meted out to the lower castes, despite his many worthy qualities. Hegde also highlights how the awareness of being an orphan — cast away as soon as he was born — haunts Karna throughout his life. (Traditionally, Karna's role was presented in Yakṣagāna

Keremane Shambhu Hegde as Jarasandha. The headgear is designed by him for demonic characters. Inset: Shambhu Hegde.

highlighting only his valour.) Thus the story of Karna becomes a new discourse, with contemporary relevance.

For this purpose, changes have to be made in the written text. Suitable editing, sometimes the addition of new songs and deletion of others become necessary. The new approach adopted by Shambhu Hegde naturally involves the cooperation of fellow artists. They have to act under his 'direction' at least so far as creating a character on stage goes. This again brings us back to the question of the freedom of the artist in a form like Yakṣagana. Shambhu Hegde himself prefers to work with artists who share his views, mostly members of his own troupe. Nevertheless, there has been the criticism that his performances are 'one-man shows', dominated by one artist, instead of being a group activity.

In such prasangas we can witness a truly indigenous form of tragedy emerging from within a traditional form like Yakṣagana. The spectators sympathize with the hero and witness the fall of a great man. This points to the deritualized context of Yakṣagana today, where such interpretations can be both attempted and accepted. It is a moot question if the value system represented in the epics is also reversed in the process. It would require a socio-cultural study much beyond the scope of this article to analyse this process in the performative context of Yakṣagana.

Shambhu Hedge has been a professional artist throughout his life. But he has never allowed his creativity and originality to be caught in the rut of commercialism. He has thought about almost all aspects of Yakṣagana, and brought about changes wherever necessary. Even such a thing as the need for change in make-up when electric lights replaced oil lamps has not escaped his notice. Many changes he has brought about at the organizational level are now common practice in professional Yakṣagana.

Yakṣagana is a multi media form, and thus artists, depending on their talent and predilection, tend to lay emphasis on any one of these media to the exclusion of others. If some actors capitalize on their improvised dialogue, others lay emphasis on dance or costume and make-up, etc. It is to Shambhu Hegde's credit that he never forgets that Yakṣagana is a dance theatre and always strives to achieve a proper balance between the different media.

Dr G.S. Bhat, who has researched extensively on Shambhu Hegde, recognizes his contribution to Yakṣagana as keeping the proper balance between tradition and experimentation even while making the theatre commercially viable. He is of the view that Shambhu Hegde's way may become the model for other traditional theatrical arts of India.

Of late, Shambhu Hegde has introduced some major changes in his organization. He has given up traditional all-night performances and gives only three-hour performances. He runs a school for training Yakṣagana artists. He is also building a theatre and wants to convert the centre in his village Gunavente into a Yakṣagana study and research centre. In all this he is ably assisted by his son Shivananda Hegde, who is himself a talented artist.

Conclusion

Yakṣagana is a vibrant form that has withstood the onslaught of modernity. In fact, modern media like film or television have not affected its popularity in any marked way. Commercially organized troupes have given stability and perhaps status to Yakṣagana. At the same time, due to the compulsions of the market, they are changing the face of Yakṣagana

so quickly that it may become unrecognizable in a few decades' time. Shivarama Karanth himself, commenting on the commercial troupes, said, "They pander to low tastes and indulge in vulgar gimmicks. They care little for tradition or art."

It is in such a context that the efforts of people like Shivarama Karanth and Shambhu Hegde become important. Both of them have experimented with the form. But they have been equally keen to retain what they considered were significant features of the Yakṣagāna tradition. It is also interesting to note that in their artistic work they took different directions. The efforts of both these artists become significant as they point to the future development of this dance theatre.